

Marjie Lundstrom: Powder flies as backers, foes press positions on cosmetics bill

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California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is no "girlie man" - just ask him - but he does wear makeup.

This has not gone unnoticed by Democratic Sen. Carole Migden of San Francisco, whose hard-fought bill to clamp down on the cosmetics industry now rests in the manicured hands of our governor.

So will he or won't he?

"I think he likes to be adorned and pampered and salved up like the rest of us," says Migden, whose bill would require cosmetics companies to disclose to the state their use of chemicals linked to cancer and birth defects.

"He's exactly our target audience, and we believe that he would want to ensure safety for him and his family and for generations to come."

So here is our pro-business Republican governor with his tough-guy image, under pressure from teenage girls and beauty queens and fellow actors over beauty products - a Hollywood staple.

SB 484, known as the California Safe Cosmetics Act, would require cosmetics companies to disclose to the Department of Health Services any ingredients known by the state to cause cancer or birth defects. The department, which would be authorized to investigate the chemicals' health impacts, could make the product lists available on a Web site for public viewing.

We're not exactly awash with knowledge. The nonprofit Environmental Working Group last year found that only 11 percent of personal care product ingredients cataloged by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have been screened by the FDA for safety. Cosmetics sold in Europe have been reformulated after a ban took effect last year on certain ingredients that still are in use in this country.

So here we are, slathering ourselves daily with goop and goo we don't know much about - especially over the long term, as beauty rituals tend to be.

"We (in California) make sure everything having to do with human consumption is 100 percent safe," said Migden. "But we allow an unregulated industry of cosmetics/beauty care to allow us to douse ourselves in these products without necessarily having the public safety protections."

The industry says this is nonsense, and that Migden's bill is an unnecessary and costly new regulation. Randy Pollack, a lawyer and lobbyist for the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association, says there are "plenty of laws" governing product safety.

"One thing there's no shortage of out there is trial attorneys," he said. "If there's really a danger of cosmetics, you're going to know fairly quickly."

Up until now, the fight has been brutal - on both sides. So relentless was Migden in ensuring her bill's passage that she popped over to the floor of the Assembly during a vote and pushed a Republican member's "yes" button.

Meanwhile, the \$35 billion industry unleashed its own big guns on the Capitol in what bill supporters saw as a "David and Goliath" confrontation.

"The legislators had never seen anything like it," said Janet Nudelman of the Breast Cancer Fund, which has pressed for the bill alongside Breast Cancer Action and the National Environmental Trust. "They were literally hiding because so many industry representatives were roaming the halls."

With the public spectacle over, the bill's fate lies with the governor, who will certainly listen to big business. But supporters have forged alliances they believe also will get his attention.

Last week, actress and Screen Actors Guild President Melissa Gilbert wrote the governor, urging him to sign the bill. "As you know," she wrote, "actors are daily users of cosmetic products."

Beauty queens have also stepped forward, among them Miss California 2004 and Miss Teen World USA.

"Miss California Calls on Mr. Universe to Sign Cosmetics Bill," supporters announced this week.

Miss Teen World USA Sasha Hoffman, 18, a former Marin County resident, was among a group of Marin teens who tried to see Schwarzenegger last week but missed him, meeting instead with an aide. Marin has one of the highest breast cancer rates in the country.

It's a lot of drama for a bill that seems rather modest, since it wouldn't ban any ingredients or require new labeling. It's about disclosure, period.

So why all the fuss? "If their products are safe," says Nudelman, "they have nothing to worry about."

If they aren't, a lot of us - including the governor - apparently do.